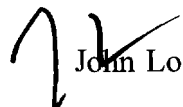


**UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT MEMORANDUM  
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION**

**DATE:** June 6, 1997

**TO:** William F. Caton  
Acting Secretary

**FROM:** JoAnn Lucanik  
Chief, Policy & Rules Division  
Cable Services Bureau

**THROUGH:**  John Logan

**RE:** Video Programming Ratings (CS Docket No. 97-55)

**DOCKET FILE COPY ORIGINAL**

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**JUN 6 1997**

Federal Communications Commission  
Office of Secretary

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Please include the attached documents in the public record of CS Docket No. 97-55:  
(1) "The 'Family Hour': No Place for Your Kids;" and (2) "A TV Ratings Report Card:  
F for Failure," provided by the Media Research Center's Parents Television Council.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

**cc:** Meredith Jones  
Bill Johnson  
Rick Chessen  
Larry Walke

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TELEVISION  
COUNCIL

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
May 8, 1997

# Special

a study from the Parents  
the Media Research Center

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## Ratings Fail to Help Parents

# The 'Family Hour': No Place for Your Kids

Recently, the public has expressed strong displeasure over two aspects of prime time television: raunchy program content, widely considered especially objectionable in the so-called family hour, and the failed parental-guidance ratings system. Parents Television Council studies have documented that in each case, the displeasure was justified.

Now, the PTC has re-explored both issues in a new report, "The 'Family Hour': No Place for Your Kids," which examines prime time fare airing between 8 and 9 ET during the February 1997 sweeps period. In 93 hours of programming -- 144 shows -- researchers found:

- ◆ Vulgar language is even more frequent than it was in the fall of '95, the period examined in our first family hour study. Then, there was an average of 0.62 obscenities per hour between 8 and 9 ET; this time, the figure jumped to 0.88.
- ◆ Fox was easily the most foulmouthed network, with more than two obscenities per hour on average. In '95, it took only 1.26 per hour (NBC's figure) to lead the pack.
- ◆ Forty-eight -- exactly one-third -- of the programs contained vulgar language.
- ◆ There were sixty references to sexual intercourse, an average of 0.65 per hour. References to sex outside of marriage outnumbered references to sex within it by a ratio of 3.6 to 1, but that represents an improvement over '95's ratio of 8 to 1.
- ◆ Fox was also the most sexually obsessed network, with 1.06 references per hour. Fox led in '95 as well, with 0.88.
- ◆ Forty-four -- almost 31 percent -- of the programs referred to sex.
- ◆ Only thirty-two percent of program hours were rated G. In other words, even by the permissive standards of the networks, which rate their own shows, less than a third of programming met the definition the G rating states, "suitable for all ages."
- ◆ Of the 86 family-hour shows rated PG, meaning they're supposedly appropriate for everyone except young children, 31 (36 percent) contained sexual references, and 42 (49 percent) included obscenities.

On the World Wide Web: <http://www.mediaresearch.org/ptc>

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# The 'Family Hour': No Place for Your Kids

By Thomas Johnson

## I. Introduction

For decades, virtually all television shows airing between 8 and 9 p.m. Eastern and Pacific time (7-8 p.m. Central and Mountain time) were suitable for children. When exceptions to this rule became fairly common in the mid-1970s, the networks, in response to prodding from Congress and the Federal Communications Commission, formally agreed to make the first hour of prime time a "family hour," to set it aside for all-ages programming. The Writers Guild of America and other groups went to court to challenge the restriction on First Amendment and antitrust grounds, and won: the official family hour was struck down in 1976. Nonetheless, the networks continued to abide by its spirit, and in the succeeding decade and a half the 8-to-9 time slot was home to such wholesome series as *Happy Days* and *The Cosby Show*.

However, in recent years programs containing sexual material and vulgar language have invaded this time slot in unprecedented volume, rendering the "family hour" almost obsolete. A February 1996 Media Research Center study which analyzed shows from a four-week period in the fall of 1995 found 72 obscenities in 117 hours of 8-to-9 p.m. programming. Moreover, portrayals of sex outside of marriage -- premarital, extramarital, and homosexual -- outnumbered those of sex within it by a ratio of 8 to 1.

Parental outrage over this decline in standards provoked a national debate over the quality of prime time fare. Of greatest concern to all parties was the impact of offensive programming on youngsters. Public policy organizations, elected officials, and even some TV executives recognized that the raunch in the 8 p.m. hour had gotten out of hand.

The industry responded not by changing program content, but by implementing, on January 1, 1997, an age-based parental-guidance ratings system which quickly came under fire from all sides. A Parents Television Council study released in February of this year examined two weeks' of January shows and concluded that the system was so contradictory and inconsistent as to be meaningless. For example, researchers found that more than half of the PG-rated programs contained obscene language or sexual material, even though that rating supposedly indicates a program is appropriate for children as young as ten.

What follows is a sequel to the February 1996 study which reviews four weeks of family-hour shows; it also scrutinizes the performance of the ratings system, as the February 1997 report did. The new study documents that the so-called family hour, once a safe haven for viewers of all ages, may now be the most dangerous time slot for families, a time slot which parents, recalling

the favorite TV series of their childhood, may still believe is family-oriented. In fact, though, today's 8-to-9 viewer is inundated with filthy language, sexual innuendo, and perverse storylines.

Nielsen figures indicate that on an average night, the broadcast networks have 13.1 million prime time viewers age 17 and under. Viewership among the young is especially high before 9 o'clock. According to the ratings for the week of April 14-20, eight of the ten most popular shows among 2-to-5-year-olds, and seven of the ten most watched by 6-to-11-year-olds, aired in the family hour. In short, an awful lot of children are regularly exposed to an awful lot of garbage.

## II. Study Parameters

We examined four weeks (January 30 through February 26) of family-hour programming on the broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, UPN, and WB). This was a sweeps period, in which local advertising rates are set. Consequently, networks, in order to boost audience ratings for their affiliates, air almost no reruns during this time; new series episodes and special programs dominate the schedule. The study period comprised 93 hours and 144 programs. Only programming made for television was evaluated. Two two-hour programs — the February 3 *Melrose Place* (Fox) and the February 24 *Savannah* (WB) — broadcast from 8 to 10 p.m. were treated as if they aired entirely within the "family hour."

Our main concerns were vulgar language (i.e., swearing) and sexual material. The second category comprises only references to, or depictions of, sexual intercourse. Innuendo was not quantified, but it was undeniably frequent. An especially bawdy example, from the February 5, PG-rated *Pearl* (CBS), illustrates the type of humor children can hear in sitcoms:

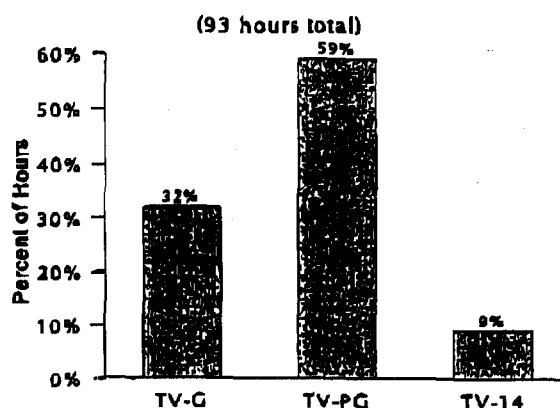
College professor: "I have been involved with the finest balls [in the sense of a social dance] this campus has to offer. Some of them have been quite large."

Dean: "You were involved with the president's balls?"

Professor: "Yes, I handled them both."

There was not enough violence to warrant a separate statistical category, but we kept track of violent depictions and describe them where germane.

Ratings Applied in the Family Hour



### III. Results

#### Overview

■ A total of 82 obscenities aired, a rate of 0.88 per hour. *The fall '95 figure was 0.62 per hour.*

■ "Ass" (29 times) was the most-often-used curse word. Runners-up: "bastard" (13) and various euphemistic and bleeped forms of the f-word (10). *The top three in '95: "ass" (29), "bitch" (13), and "bastard" (10).*

■ Fox was easily the most foulmouthed network, with 2.06 obscenities per hour. A distant second was NBC, at 0.91. *Worst in '95: NBC, with 1.26.*

■ Exactly one-third -- 48 -- of the programs contained obscenities.

■ There were 60 references to sexual intercourse, a ratio of 0.65 per hour. Thirty-two of those references were to premarital sex; twelve were to marital sex; eleven to extramarital sex. (In five instances, marital status was unclear.) The overall sex-outside-marriage to sex-within-marriage ratio was 3.6 to 1. *The '95 ratio was 8 to 1.*

■ Fox also was the most sexually obsessed network, with 1.06 references per hour. CBS (0.82) and NBC (0.67) were second and third. *Fox led in '95 with 0.88.*

■ Almost 31 percent -- 44 -- of the programs contained at least one reference to sexual intercourse.

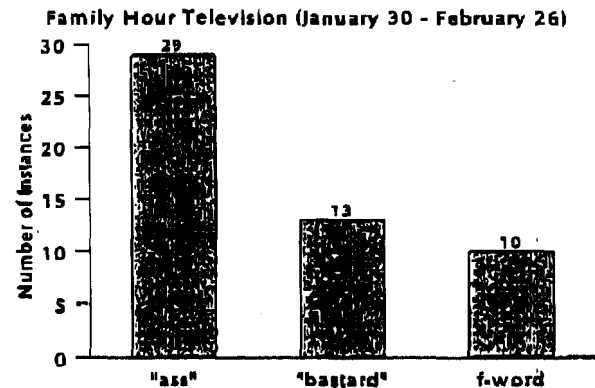
■ The most family-friendly full-time network, in terms of airing the least foul language and fewest sexual references, was ABC. *ABC and CBS were the cleanest in '95.*

■ Thirty-two percent of program hours were rated G; 59 percent were rated PG; 9 percent were rated TV-14. In other words, even by the permissive standards of the networks -- which rate their own shows-- only a third of family-hour programming was "suitable for all ages," as the definition of the G rating states.

■ Of the 86 family-hour shows rated PG -- meaning they're supposedly appropriate for everyone except young children -- 31 (36 percent) contained sexual references, and 42 (49 percent) included obscenities.

■ Only WB aired more G than PG programming.

#### Most Often Used Obscenities



■ No made-for-TV program was rated TV-M, signifying "specifically designed to be viewed by adults."

## The Networks

### ABC

Totals: 12.5 hours, 7 obscenities (0.56/hour), 4 sexual references (0.32/hour)  
20 shows, 4 (20 percent) with obscenities, 3 (15 percent) with sexual references

**TV-G (6 shows, 0 with obscenities, 0 with sex)**

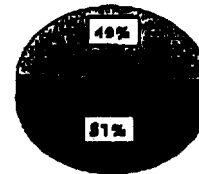
**TV-PG (13 shows, 4 with obscenities, 2 with sex)**

**TV-14 (1 show, 0 with obscenities, 1 with sex)**

### Content of PG Shows

Aired during the Family Hour

→ Language: More than two-thirds of ABC's curse words were found on *Roseanne*. During the February 18 episode, the title character says of her estranged husband, Dan, "That bastard! I will certainly not calm down! He can just go [bleeped, but clearly the f-word] himself!" She utters two more bleeped words with her back to the camera. The previous week, Roseanne comments, "I'm gonna be squeezing my ass into size 10 pants." Both episodes were rated PG.



 With Obscenities  
 Without Obscenities

The other obscenities were found on the February 13 *High Incident* ("Take me to this s.o.b.") and the February 26 *Grace Under Fire* ("Lucky bastard"), also PG shows.

→ Sex: Two references to premarital sex on the February 12 *Grace Under Fire*, and one on the February 19 installment of the same show; both episodes were rated PG. There was also one miscellaneous reference on the January 30 *High Incident* (TV-14), when a burglar tells the police that he and his fellow crooks used to break into houses and hold orgies.

*High Incident* can be violent at times. The January 30 episode, which included a shootout and several bloody corpses, was the only TV-14 ABC show in the study period.

## CBS

Totals: 22 hours, 13 obscenities (0.59/hour), 18 sexual references (0.82/hour)  
31 shows, 10 (32 percent) with obscenities, 13 (42 percent) with sexual references

**TV-G (13 shows, 1 with obscenities, 2 with sex)**

**TV-PG (18 shows, 9 with obscenities, 11 with sex)**

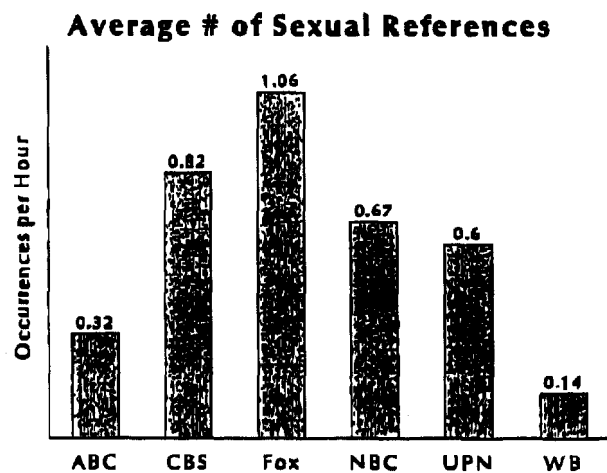
→ Language: One G-rated show, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, contained an obscenity on February 7: Raymond calls the child who gave Raymond's daughter a valentine a "cheap bastard."

CBS had three of the five uses of "piss" in the study; two were found on PG-rated installments of *Ink*. On February 3, Kate states that she still has feelings for her ex, "and that is why I'm so pissed off." The next week, a woman in an office says, "It really scared...us the day the milkman showed up all pissed off."

PG episodes with more than one obscenity were the January 30 *Diagnosis Murder* ("bastard," "frickin'"), the February 19 *Pearl* ("sucks," "frickin'"), and the February 21 *Dave's World* ("ass," "screw").

→ Sex: All three episodes of *Everybody Loves Raymond*, which centers on a couple in their mid-thirties and their children, included sexual references. The PG-rated January 31 episode concerns Raymond's old car, of which he has fond memories inasmuch as he lost his virginity in it during high school. Raymond's wife, Debbie, wants him to sell the car because she wasn't the woman her husband lost his virginity to, but after they make love in the car she feels better about his keeping it.

A continuing plot line on *Ink* is the lingering attraction between Kate and Mike, a divorced couple. In the PG-rated February 3 installment, they visit a therapist, and during the session agree that sleeping together would dissipate the tension between them. "Let's get it over with," Kate says. "Like a flu shot," adds Mike. They go to a hotel. Other PG shows which more than once dealt with sex outside of marriage were *Dave's World* (January 31 and February 21) and *Pearl* (February 5 and 12).



## Fox

Totals: 18 hours, 37 obscenities (2.06/hour), 19 sexual references (1.06/hour)  
24 shows, 17 (71 percent) with obscenities, 11 (46 percent) with sexual references

**TV-PG (18 shows, 13 with obscenities, 6 with sex)**

**TV-14 (6 shows, 4 with obscenities, 5 with sex)**

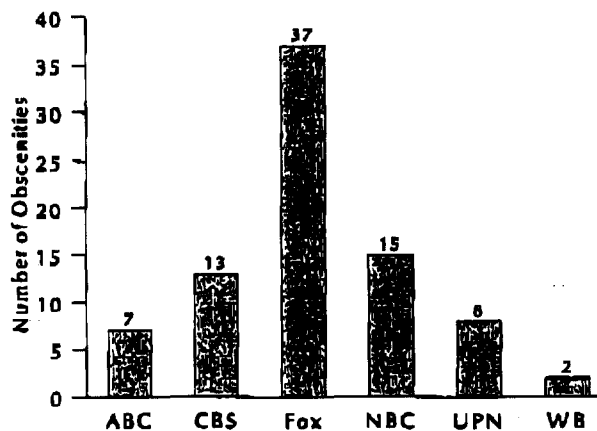
→ **Language:** Fox far exceeded last year's cursingest network, NBC, which had 1.26 obscenities per hour. Leader of the pack, so to speak, was the two-hour, TV-14 rated February 3 installment of *Melrose Place*, with six swear words: "son of a bitch" twice, "ass" twice, "bastard," and "bite me."

The next week, *Melrose* featured two uses of "son of a bitch" and one each of "bastard" and "bitch." (The soap's 14 obscenities in its four episodes exceeded the totals for all other networks except its own, of course, and NBC, which had 15.)

Honors for second-most curse words in a Fox episode go to the PG-rated February 5 *Beverly Hills, 90210*, which included three uses of "bitch" and two of "bastard." The network's Sunday-night, PG-rated cartoons were by no means obscenity-free: on February 9, *The Simpsons* contained "freakin'" and "bastard," and "ass" was heard twice on that night's *King of the Hill*.

Fox led in the use of "ass" (13 to second-place UPN's 7) and "bastard" (6 to CBS's 3) and dominated both "bitch" and "son of a bitch," airing six of the seven uses of the latter and six of the eight uses of the former.

**Obscenities by Network**



→ **Sex:** *Melrose Place*'s 11 portrayals not only equaled NBC's total, but almost matched the figure for ABC, UPN, and WB combined (12). The episodes of February 10 (PG), 17, and 24 (both TV-14) each referred to premarital, extramarital, and — a nod to traditional morality — marital sex. Next to *Melrose*, *Beverly Hills, 90210*, with four references to premarital sex (three TV-14, one PG), seemed tame.



**NBC**

Totals: 16.5 hours, 15 obscenities (0.91/hour), 11 sexual references (0.67/hour),  
30 shows, 12 (40 percent) with obscenities, 9 (30 percent) with sexual references

**TV-G (4 shows, 0 with obscenities, 0 with sex)**

**TV-PG (25 shows, 12 with obscenities, 8 with sex)**

**TV-14 (1 show, 0 with obscenities, 1 with sex)**

→ **Language:** The worst offender was 3<sup>rd</sup> Rock from the Sun (PG) on February 2, with "screwed," "pissing," and "bastard." As did Fox and CBS, NBC aired three euphemistic f-words, two of them on *Wings* (PG). For example, when Joe's brother Brian is slated for a sandwich commercial on February 5, Joe complains that his own, supporting role in the ad is that of "a freakin' pickle." *Chicago Sons* (February 5, PG) and *Something So Right* (February 25, PG) aired the phrase "this sucks."

→ **Sex:** *Friends* has a well-deserved reputation for being the sexiest sitcom on television, but it's being challenged for that title by *Chicago Sons*, which debuted in January. On February 12, three adult brothers and a female friend fly to the Bahamas for a vacation. Their first night there, the oldest brother sleeps with the owner of the resort where they're staying, and the friend sleeps with an umbrella boy. The next week, that same brother has sex with his estranged wife on top of a kitchen table, and another brother and the female friend take a sex break from his helping her move in with her boyfriend. Both episodes were rated PG.

The *Friends* weren't exactly celibate. On January 30, Monica sleeps with her fiftyish boyfriend, with whom she'd broken up because she wanted children and he didn't. That episode was rated TV-14, apparently because of a plotline involving a man whose shorts are so baggy that his privates are visible when he sits and spreads his legs. Three weeks later, Ross, believing his relationship with Rachel is over, spends the night with a woman he met in a bar. That episode was rated PG.

**UPN**

Totals: 10 hours, 8 obscenities (0.80/hour), 6 sexual references (0.60/hour)  
17 shows, 4 (24 percent) with obscenities, 6 (35 percent) with sexual references

**TV-G (7 shows, 1 with obscenities, 3 with sex)**

**TV-PG (10 shows, 3 with obscenities, 3 with sex)**

→ **Language:** All but one of the network's obscenities were "ass." The word was used three times on the February 3 *Malcolm and Eddie* (PG); in one instance, Eddie declared, "Somebody call a garden, 'cause your ass is grass." "Ass" was used twice on the G-rated February 17 *In the House*. A regular female character says, "You're about to get your ass busted," and "Your ass is mine."

→ **Sex:** Three of four *In the House* episodes (all rated G) contained sexual references. On February 3, a woman tells an ex-boyfriend, "And, for the record, I faked it." The February 17 *Malcolm and Eddie* (PG) was quite raunchy; over breakfast, Eddie asks a one-night stand, in so many words, how many orgasms she had.

## WB

Totals: 14 hours, 2 obscenities (0.14/hour), 2 sexual references (0.14/hour)  
22 shows, 1 (5 percent) with obscenities, 2 (9 percent) with sexual references.

**TV-G (20 shows, 0 with obscenities, 1 with sex)**

**TV-PG (2 shows, 1 with obscenities, 1 with sex)**

→ **Language:** The only curse words ("ass," "bitch") were found on the February 24 *Savannah* (PG), normally a 9 o'clock series which aired a two-hour episode (8-10 p.m.) that night.

→ **Sex:** A newly married couple makes love on the aforementioned *Savannah*, and a fiftyish couple celebrates their anniversary by making love on the G-rated February 23 *Steve Harvey Show*.

## IV. Conclusion

The family-hour picture is, if anything, bleaker than it was in the fall of 1995. Foul language increased dramatically, and even though marital sex makes a better showing than it did in our first family-hour study, it still appears far less often than sex outside of marriage. Moreover, in the first hour of prime time, when the audience skews young, isn't it reasonable to expect that sexual references of any kind would be extremely infrequent? Alas, in today's television, such an expectation is extremely unrealistic.

As for the ratings system, it's often badly misapplied. That UPN's *In the House*, which generally contains sexual material and obscenities, is consistently rated G is simply disingenuous. It's likewise misleading, and absurd, that sexually obsessed, vulgar sitcoms such as NBC's *Chicago Sons* and *Pearl* on CBS are routinely rated PG. On the other hand, the adult-oriented *Melrose Place* on Fox is usually rated TV-14, appropriately enough, but why is this kind of show on at 8 o'clock, no matter what its rating?

Blame is not equally distributed among the networks. WB has lived up to its reputation as youth-oriented, and ABC provided a great deal of general-audience fare. CBS boasts of its family-friendliness but disappointed because it was only slightly less racy than NBC, which barely even tries to reach the family audience. UPN needs to clean up certain parts of its act, and Fox...well, the numbers speak for themselves.

The powers that be appear willing to consider junking age-based ratings in favor of a content-based system, but as the abundance of raunch detailed above indicates, how or whether to rate its programs is not prime time's biggest problem. The anything-goes mentality is.

The industry wants to have it both ways. It not only wants to appeal to those who enjoy adult content even between 8 and 9, but also to rate shows deceptively, thereby falsely indicating they're appropriate for youngsters. This dual strategy must end. Networks should air family-friendly programs before 9 o'clock; either that, or unambiguously state that the family hour is dead, that they will broadcast adult-oriented shows in that time slot, and that parents in search of appropriate television entertainment for their children will have to resort to cable or videocassettes. We would prefer a return to the traditional family hour, but if prime time goes the other way and chooses to neglect the family audience, it ought to forthrightly acknowledge having made this choice.

*Research compiled by Jessica Bearor, Christine Brookhart, Thomas Johnson, and Alice Lynn O'Steen Kapoyos*

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
February 11, 1997

# Special Report

a study from the Parents Television Council,  
the Media Research Center's Hollywood project



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## Ratings Reality Check

# A TV Ratings Report Card: F for Failure

The new, age-based ratings system for television is a failure. There is no inter-network consistency in the ratings. Worse, there is not even intra-network consistency. In short, the age-based system, which the television industry promised would help inform and assist parents in choosing appropriate shows for their children, is making such a determination more confusing than ever before. These are the conclusions of a Parents Television Council content analysis of two weeks -- 150 hours -- of prime time television on ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, UPN, and WB. Among the report's findings:

- ◆ The G-rated show is not necessarily a safe haven for children of all ages. Shows with vulgarities have garnered a G rating.
- ◆ The PG rating -- given to more than three-fifths of programming -- is hopelessly vague, applied with abandon to shows containing sexual material and obscenities and shows containing neither. Not only is there little consistency within a rating among the networks, there is no intra-network consistency. Every network gave the TV-PG rating to shows with sexual themes and/or obscenities, *and* to ones with neither.
- ◆ Obscenities appeared almost as often in PG shows as in those rated TV-14. Fifty-two percent of PG offerings routinely contained such words as "ass," "bastard," "son of a bitch," and so on. Sixty-eight percent of TV-14 shows included similar vulgarities.
- ◆ The shows with extremely racy content are almost always rated PG. In fact, shows rated TV-14, which supposedly are for an older audience, had only slightly more sexual content than PG fare.
- ◆ Programs were rated TV-14 for violence, rough language, or other sophisticated themes, yet there were shows rated PG with *more* violence than those given a TV-14.
- ◆ TV-M, indicating a show meant for adults, was not used at all in prime time, thus declaring that everything during these hours was appropriate for youngsters. Later this month, NBC will apply TV-M to *Schindler's List*, meaning that the network thinks sexually oriented PG sitcoms like *Friends* and *Men Behaving Badly* are more appropriate for children than this Oscar-winning film.

The study concludes that the proposed content-based ratings, which the television industry dismissed last year, would better serve the public by providing consistency and uniformity in telling parents what sort of material appears on a given program, something the current system fails to do.

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# A Ratings Report Card

by Thomas Johnson

## I. Introduction

On February 29, 1996, TV executives announced they would rate entertainment programming so as to inform parents about its suitability, or lack thereof, for young viewers. The announcement was spurred not only by public demand for parental-guidance ratings, but also by the possibility that the federal government might impose a system if the industry didn't. Under those circumstances, television chose to regulate itself.

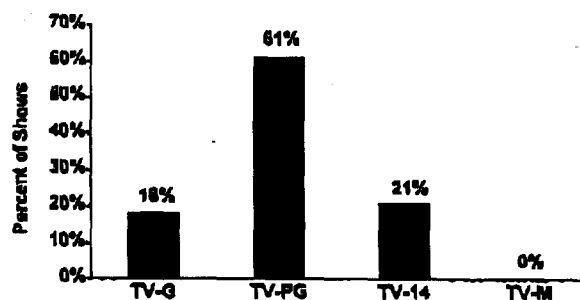
Almost ten months later, on December 19, a ratings system was unveiled. Despite widespread public support — 80 percent in one poll — for guidelines that would indicate specifically whether a show contained certain types of potentially objectionable content, the industry opted for an age-based system much like that used for theatrical films since the 1960s. (Unlike movies, which are rated by an independent board, under the new system TV shows are rated by their networks and distributors.)

These ratings went into effect on January 1, 1997. For two weeks thereafter, the Parents Television Council scrutinized prime time programming on the six commercial broadcast networks to determine how the new system was functioning. The answer: it isn't. As applied, it is liberal in its definition of what kind of material is suitable for children.

It also is inconsistent in both an inter- and intra-network sense. This confusion is manifest primarily among PG-rated shows. A little over half included obscene language or sexual material, meaning, of course, that a little under half didn't. Therefore,

parents assuming that PG means basically child-safe are playing a guessing game in which they have more than a 50 percent chance of being wrong. Moreover, while all the networks were permissive in their assessment of how much sexuality youngsters should be exposed to, some networks (CBS, Fox) occasionally rated racy sitcom episodes TV-14, while others (ABC, NBC) never did.

Ratings Applied in Prime Time  
(150 hours total)



Many who backed a content-based system foresaw these flaws, but one member of the group that devised the official ratings said that nothing other than age-based guidelines were ever seriously contemplated. "This was the only system the whole TV industry would agree to," he told the *Los Angeles Times*. Jack Valenti, the Motion Picture Association of America chief who led the television ratings group, contended that a content-based system would have confused the audience and would not have been viable given the need to rate the thousands of hours of original TV programming produced every year.

## II. The System

There are six categories in the television ratings system. Two designations, TV-Y and TV-Y7, apply only to children's programs, such as *The Flintstones* and *Animaniacs*, most of which air weekday afternoons and on Saturday mornings.

The three ratings used thus far for prime time shows are as follows. (All quotations are from the press release issued by the industry group that devised the ratings system.)

- ◆ TV-G: General Audience. "Most parents would find this program suitable for all ages. It contains little or no violence, no strong language and little or no sexual dialogue or situations."
- ◆ TV-PG: Parental Guidance Suggested. "This program may contain some material that some parents would find unsuitable for younger children. [It] may contain infrequent coarse language, limited violence, [and] some suggestive sexual dialogue and situations."
- ◆ TV-14: Parents Strongly Cautioned. "This program may contain some material that many parents would find unsuitable for children under 14 years of age. [It] may contain sophisticated sexual themes, sexual content, strong language and more intense violence."

The sixth rating is TV-M, which no program received during our study period. TV-M designates shows "specifically designed to be viewed by adults and [which] therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17. [They] may contain mature themes, profane language, graphic violence and explicit sexual content." It is expected that TV-M will apply almost exclusively to late-night and cable fare.

## III. Study Parameters

The study period lasted fourteen days, from Friday, January 3 through Thursday, January 16. The PTC looked at prime time entertainment programs on ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, UPN, and WB. (Each of the latter two networks broadcasts only three nights a week.) Of the main factors -- sex, language, and violence -- the former two were the most prevalent and were quantified. Depictions of violence were far less frequent, but are discussed below when germane.

## IV. Findings

### Overview

■ The six networks aired 150 hours of entertainment programming over the two weeks. Ninety-two hours (61.3 percent) were rated TV-PG; thirty-one hours (20.7 percent) were rated TV-14; twenty-seven hours (18 percent) were rated TV-G.

■ The G rating does not necessarily indicate a safe haven for children of all ages. Shows with vulgarities and sexual references have garnered a G rating.

■ The PG rating -- given to more than three-fifths of programming -- is hopelessly vague, applied with abandon to shows containing sexual material and vulgar language and shows containing neither.

■ Obscenities appeared almost as often in PG shows as in those rated TV-14. Fifty-two percent of PG shows contained such words as "ass," "bastard," "son of a bitch," and "suck." One PG episode, of ABC's *Life's Work*, included two obvious uses of "f---ing" that were drowned out by the sound of a power drill. Sixty-eight percent of TV-14 shows included similar vulgarities. Overall, there were 189 incidences of vulgar language, an average of 1.26 per hour. In TV-PG shows viewers heard 1.48 obscenities per hour.

■ Programs usually were rated TV-14 for violence, rough language, or other sophisticated themes, yet some PG shows contained more violence than TV-14 offerings. In fact, while slightly more TV-14 than TV-PG shows contained sexual references, PG shows included more sexual references per hour: 0.88 in TV-PG shows compared to 0.74 in TV-14 programs.

■ TV-M, indicating a show meant for adults, was not applied at all, thus declaring that everything during prime time was suitable for youngsters. Later this month, NBC will apply TV-M to *Schindler's List*, meaning that the network thinks sexually oriented PG sitcoms like *Friends* and *Men Behaving Badly* are appropriate for children, but this Oscar-winning film isn't.

### The Networks

We will handle the networks one by one, rating by rating, with outstanding examples from each category.

### ABC

Totals: 32 hours, 33 obscenities, 21 sexual references

#### *TV-G (5.5 hours, 0 obscenities, 2 sexual references)*

➡ Sex: ABC has long targeted the family audience on Friday nights. The network's current Friday lineup -- *Family Matters*; *Boy Meets World*; *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*; and *Clueless* -- is wholesome, though not completely devoid of mild sexual material. The January 10 *Clueless* (9:30 p.m. ET, comedy), conveyed a pro-abstinence message. A teenager told his

girlfriend that he's always creative when he's lying under the stars with her. She responded that in reality, "the creativity burden falls on me...having to come up with new ways to tell you 'no.'"

**TV-PG (21.5 hours, 17 obscenities, 16 sexual references)**

➡ **Language:** On the January 14 *Life's Work* (8:30 p.m. ET, comedy) the lead character twice complained that she was being driven "out of my f---ing mind." In both cases, the obscenity was drowned out by the sound of a power drill, but anyone with adequate lip-reading skills could discern what she was saying. The January 8 *Grace Under Fire* (9 p.m. ET, comedy) contained three curse words ("bastard," "bitched," "ass").

PG shows with obscenities: 13 of 26 (50 percent).

➡ **Sex:** On January 7, *Life's Work* included several jokes about a naked man masturbating by rubbing against a tree. A co-worker asked the lead character, Lisa, "How can that possibly feel good?" "Come on," Lisa answered, "you haven't lived until you've gotten yourself some oak." On January 7 and 14, *Roseanne* (8 p.m. ET, comedy) dealt with the possibility of adultery, as Roseanne's husband, Dan, admitted that even though he hadn't slept with his mother's nurse, he was attracted to her. In emphasizing the impact of marital strife on the family, not Dan's personal fulfillment, the episodes took a position against extramarital sex.

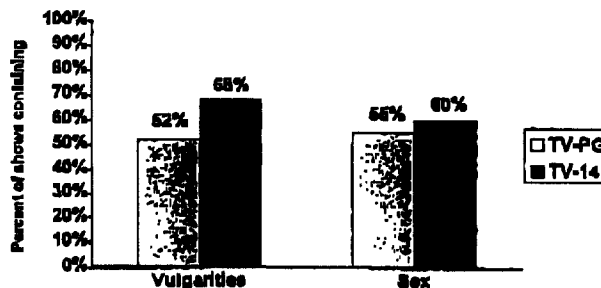
PG shows with sexual references: 12 (46 percent).

**TV-14 (5 hours, 16 obscenities, 3 sexual references)**

➡ **Language:** All but one of the swear words was found on the January 7 and 14 installments of *NYPD Blue* (10 p.m. ET, drama), with "ass," "asshole," "balls," "bitch," and "son of a bitch" among the expressions heard. Presumably, the TV-14 designation resulted from the cursing, inasmuch as neither episode was especially violent, and neither contained the nudity this series is known for.

➡ **Sex:** The January 11 *Relativity* (10 p.m. ET, drama) was truly envelope-pushing. A couple in their twenties was making love; as the man climaxed, he asked the woman to marry him. The proposal, and the circumstances under which it was made, came up repeatedly during the

Prime Time TV Content





episode. Later, two lesbians kissed passionately, and a married woman and an unmarried man kissed in such a way that implied they were on the verge of an affair.

## CBS

Totals: 35 hours, 36 obscenities, 27 sexual references

### ***TV-G (10 hours, 1 obscenity, 4 sexual references)***

➔ Sex: *Everybody Loves Raymond* (8:30 p.m. ET, comedy), about a thirtyish married couple, deals with their sex life from time to time. The January 3 episode opened with Raymond and his wife, Deborah, waking up in the morning. Raymond wondered, "How about a little?" to which Deborah said, "Oh, God, I don't feel so well... Oh, God, I'm so hot," meaning feverish. "I'm getting mixed signals," Ray remarked. She then asked him to look after their children, whereupon he whined, "We could have been done by now."

### ***TV-PG (15.5 hours, 17 obscenities, 15 sexual references)***

➔ Language: Swearing was spread fairly evenly over several series. Among the episodes with two curse words was the January 10 *JAG* (9 p.m. ET, drama), on which an admiral, taken hostage by a disgruntled serviceman, snarled, "No son of a bitch is taking over my office," and, "I'll have your ass when I get out of here."

PG shows with obscenities: 11 of 21 (52 percent).

➔ Sex: Probably the most egregious was the January 6 *Ink* (8:30 p.m. ET, comedy). This installment of the newspaper sitcom centered on a madam and her little black book, with one reporter exclaiming, "This story has everything! Sex in a car, sex after lunch, sex under water," and another remembering her boarding school days, when she "sold pictures of the gym teacher on the tumbling mat doing it with the headmaster." On the January 10 *Dave's World* (8 p.m. ET, comedy), a *Playboy* Playmate mentioned how much she enjoyed Dave's newspaper column, thereby setting up a pervasively sexual episode containing several penis and breast jokes. One male character commented lasciviously, "I'm turned on by a gentle touch, but when push comes to shove, I love a wet T-shirt contest."

PG shows with sexual references: 13 (62 percent).

### ***TV-14 (9.5 hours, 18 obscenities, 8 sexual references)***

➔ Language: The new Larry Hagman dramatic vehicle *Orleans* has been somewhat foul-mouthed; the two-hour premiere on January 8 (9 to 11 p.m. ET) contained three uses of "ass" and two of "son of a bitch." The one-hour January 15 episode, at the usual 10 p.m. airtime, included "ass" twice, plus "bastard" and "son of a bitch." Four obscenities were heard on the January 10 *Nash Bridges* (10 p.m. ET, drama); at one point a detective says his girlfriend

"talks about Ross Perot just to piss me off." On January 6, the title character on *Cybill* (9:30 p.m. ET, comedy) used the euphemistic "freakin' A."

➡ **Sex:** The same *Cybill* episode had to do with a bachelor party and, logically enough, strippers. Observing *Cybill*'s ex dancing, her friend Maryann opined, "He gyrates quite nicely. He has the pelvis of a pro." *Cybill* responded, "Why do you think I stayed with him for seventeen years?" On the January 9 *Moloney* (9 p.m. ET, drama), the title character's date said she had to awaken early the next morning, adding, "I should get to bed. You want to come with me?"

## Fox

Totals: 22 hours, 35 obscenities, 22 sexual references

### ***TV-G (0.5 hours, 0 obscenities, 0 sexual references)***

The January 9 *Living Single* (8:30 p.m. ET, comedy) was Fox's only G-rated offering.

### ***TV-PG (16 hours, 33 obscenities, 11 sexual references)***

➡ **Language:** The majority of curses were found on just two episodes. The January 6 *Ned and Stacey* (9 p.m. ET, comedy) featured a muffin-shop owner whose gimmick was insulting people with such expressions as "fat-ass pimple head" and "bite me." The obscenity count was eleven, including two uses of the bleeped-out f-word. On January 9, *New York Undercover* (9 p.m. ET, drama), with nine swear words, among them four uses of "ass," added considerably to the network's total.

PG shows with obscenities: 10 of 20 (50 percent).

➡ **Sex:** On the January 15 *Beverly Hills, 90210* (8 p.m. ET, drama), Valerie said to Tom, "I'm not interested in a relationship right now." Tom countered, "We've been sleeping together. I mean, what am I supposed to think?" On the January 8 *Party of Five* (9 p.m. ET, drama), Charlie, who's in his mid-twenties, tells his high-school girlfriend that he regrets having pressured her to have sex.

PG shows with sexual references: 10 (50 percent).

Where graphic imagery was concerned, the January 12 *X-Files* (9 p.m. ET, drama), contained shots of several human corpses partially eaten by a mysterious fungus. In one shot, a man's face had been eaten away.

### ***TV-14 (5.5 hours, 2 obscenities, 11 sexual references)***

➡ **Language:** "Bitch," on the January 6 *Married... With Children* (9:30 p.m. ET, comedy), and "ass," on the January 10 *Millennium* (9 p.m. ET, drama).

➡ **Sex:** January 13 was Fox's raciest night. *Melrose Place* (8 p.m. ET, drama) featured a married couple making love, two homosexual men moving in together, and that *Melrose* staple, premarital sex. After intercourse, one single woman told her partner, "I do believe you have done the impossible, Billy Campbell. You have left me speechless." On *Married... With Children*, Bud, who's about twenty, had a fling with his father's boss, a forty-year-old woman. She began to caress him; he asked, "What are you doing?" to which she replied, "You." She gave him a pager, saying, "Remember, when it reads 911, I need you bad." Later, when a man said to Bud's father, "You didn't have a problem when [Bud's sister] Kelly dated that wealthy older man," Al asserted, "I wouldn't have a problem if *Bud* dated a wealthy older man."

The violent *Millennium* was also rated TV-14, suggesting that Fox treats extremely violent and sexual material reasonably consistently. (See the NBC entry for details on a network that doesn't.)

## NBC

Totals: 36 hours, 67 obscenities, 25 sexual references)

### TV-G (2 hours, 0 obscenities, 1 sexual reference)

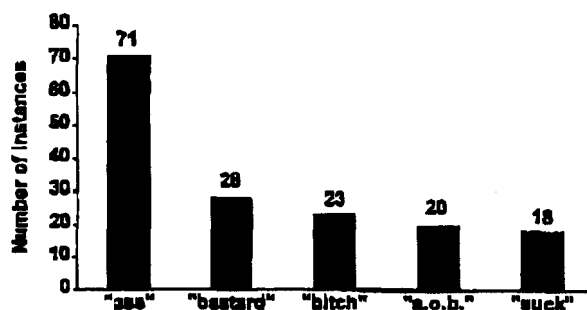
On the January 6 *Mr. Rhodes* (8:30 p.m. ET, comedy) a thirtyish woman who teaches at the same prep school she attended heard that an Impala from her student days is still being used for driver's ed, "although we didn't think of it so much as the driver's ed car as the sex ed car."

### TV-PG (23 hours, 52 obscenities, 23 sexual references)

➡ **Language:** The January 7 *Caroline in the City* (9:30 p.m. ET, comedy) led the pack with six swear words, including four variations on the phrase "men suck." On the January 9 *Suddenly Susan* (9:30 p.m. ET, comedy), the title character told Vicki not to say "bite me," to which Vicki answered, "Bite me." The January 16 *ER* (10 p.m. ET, drama) contained five obscenities; denied a vacation, a resident grumbled, "Son of a bitch," and when a difficult patient spouted seeming gibberish to a doctor, a nurse explained, "That's 'screw you' backwards."

## Most Often Used Obscenities

Prime Time Television (January 3-16, 1997)



PG shows with obscenities: 22 of 38 (58 percent).

➡ Sex: Four of five shows in the January 8 lineup referred to premarital sex. Among them: *Wings* (8 p.m. ET, comedy), on which a character talked about having sex four times a day with his new girlfriend, adding that the previous night, "we did it on the hood of my El Camino." On *Chicago Sons* (8:30 p.m. ET, comedy), a young man mused about his plan to invite an attractive female colleague to a bed and breakfast, "where we'll eat pralines off each other's naked bodies." On *Men Behaving Badly* (9:30 p.m. ET, comedy), a woman mentioned having "fifty-five hours of nonstop sex" with a man she'd just met.

But NBC topped itself the next night, with five of six episodes mentioning premarital sex. Highlights: on *Friends* (8 p.m. ET, comedy), a man reminisced about the time he ran into an old girlfriend and wound up having sex with her and her female friend that afternoon. On *Suddenly Susan*, co-workers slept together, with the woman later commenting, "It was the best sex I ever had... He did have this one move. It was like something out of Cirque du Soleil." On *Seinfeld* (9 p.m. ET, comedy), George became involved with a woman serving time for embezzlement; after she escaped from prison, George remarked, "I discovered something even better than conjugal-visit sex: fugitive sex!"

PG shows with sexual references: 22 (58 percent).

#### ***TV-14 (11 hours, 15 obscenities, 1 sexual reference)***

➡ Language: Most curse words were found in made-for-TV movies. The January 5 *Blaze Of Glory* (9-11 p.m. ET) contained five ("ass" twice, "sucks," "son of a bitch," and "bastard"), and January 13's *Home Invasion* (9-11 p.m. ET) had four ("bitch" and "screwed" twice each).

The clear pattern on NBC was to rate even raunchy sexual material TV-PG, while relatively mild violence, such as that found in their original movies, received a TV-14.

## **UPN**

Totals: 12 hours, 9 obscenities, 7 sexual references

#### ***TV-G (2.5 hours, 1 obscenity, 2 sexual references)***

The January 7 *Moesha* (8 p.m. ET, comedy) contained both instances. In one, it was established that the teenaged title character and her boyfriend were not sleeping together -- an encouraging message for prime time, which often treats teen sex as inevitable.

#### ***TV-PG (9.5 hours, 8 obscenities, 5 sexual references)***

➡ Language: The January 6 *Sparks* (9 p.m. ET, comedy) ("screwed," "bitchy") and the January 14 *Homeboys in Outer Space* (8:30 p.m., comedy) ("bastard," "ass") contained two obscenities each.

PG shows with obscenities: 6 of 14 (43 percent)

➔ Sex: Insignificant quips, such as Eddie, on the January 6 *Malcolm and Eddie* (8:30 p.m. ET, comedy), declaring, "I want *Playboy* to get rid of those articles and get straight to the pictures."

PG shows with sexual references: 5 (36 percent).

UPN had no TV-14 shows.

## WB

Totals: 13 hours, 9 obscenities, 13 sexual references

**TV-G (6.5 hours, 0 obscenities, 1 sexual reference)**

**TV-PG (6.5 hours, 9 obscenities, 12 sexual references)**

➔ Language: The January 12 *Life With Roger* (9:30 p.m. ET, comedy) included the strongest curses ("sucks," "pissed"). The other shows with more than one obscenity were the January 6 *Savannah* (9 p.m. ET, drama) ("bastard," "ass") and the January 15 *The Wayans Brothers* (9 p.m. ET, comedy) ("ass" twice).

PG shows with obscenities: 6 of 12 (50 percent).

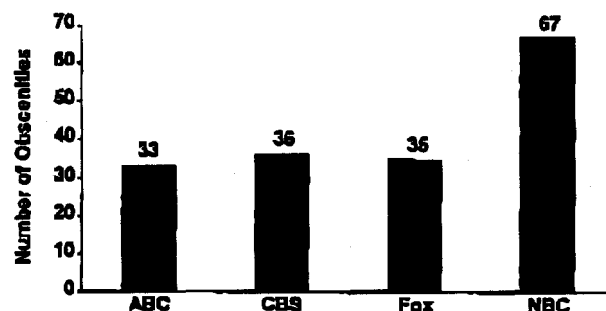
➔ Sex: On the January 6 *Savannah*, Edward and Veronica spent the night together without Edward's wife finding out, and an unmarried couple, Reese and Tom, had sex on the same series' January 13

installment. The lead character on *The Steve Harvey Show* (8:30 p.m. ET, comedy), a high-school teacher, slept with an old girlfriend during the January 12 episode, then realized he had feelings for his boss, the principal. On January 5, a teenager on *Unhappily Ever After* (9 p.m. ET, comedy) formed a rock group in order to meet women; talking about the video he's about to shoot, he asked, "I'm going to get sex out of this, aren't I?"

PG shows with sexual references: 10 (83 percent).

WB had no TV-14 shows.

## Obscenities by Network



## VI. Conclusion and Recommendations

The central flaw of the ratings system is permissiveness. Where sexual material is concerned, the major networks, particularly NBC, have a far more liberal definition of what's fine for children than does the average parent. Remember, PG means that "*some parents* would find [certain material] unsuitable for *younger children*." (Emphasis added.)

Well, let's see how that definition works in practice. PG shows have featured, for example, an unmarried couple having sex on the hood of a car; an unmarried couple having over two days of nonstop sex; a naked man masturbating in public. That outrageous level of raunch indicates these programs and others like them either should have received a stronger rating, or that PG should be amended to mean that the episode in question contained subject matter that most parents would have found unsuitable for their children, from infancy to the age of majority and perhaps beyond.

Much the same is true of obscenities. With an average of well over one swear word for each hour of PG-rated fare, it's obvious that millions of children are exposed to language that their parents would prefer they didn't hear.

Using the system now in place, the simplest reform would be to apply TV-M in prime time, and to toughen standards so that racy PG shows would instead be designated TV-14, with the M rating going to, for example, an *NYPD Blue* episode with not only several curse words but also seminudity and, perhaps, graphic violence. The typical *Frasier*, which deals subtly with adult situations, would remain PG-rated.

And yet, that is not the solution. Content-based ratings are preferable. They wouldn't necessarily reduce raunchiness, but they would more effectively let parents know what to expect. With age-based ratings, certain sex jokes can fly under the radar. If the episode in question is given a specific rating for sexual content, they can't.

The pay-cable channel Home Box Office (HBO) has a system which indicates whether a show contains various types of potentially objectionable content, and to what degree. An industry caucus whose members include Norman Lear and Aaron Spelling backs a system under which a show would receive gradations of S, V, and L ratings (for Sex, Violence, and Language).

A different and better ratings system, ironically, may allow the networks to avoid acknowledging that they've simply gone too far, especially with obscenities and sexual content in early prime time. A content-based ratings system might encourage even racier shows since they could carry a clear content rating. The most responsible thing the networks could do for both themselves and the viewers would be to exercise some self-restraint. A more wholesome prime time -- not a smutty prime time accompanied by informative parental guidelines -- ought to be the ultimate goal.

Here's a final absurdity. On February 23, NBC will broadcast *Schindler's List*, which reportedly will be rated TV-M, a first for broadcast television. It would be fascinating to hear NBC explain why it applies a PG to crass, sex-obsessed sitcoms like *Friends* and *Men Behaving Badly*, essentially stating that they're suitable for all but young children, yet with a

TV-M essentially recommends to parents that not even teenagers should watch *Schindler's List*. Or maybe NBC couldn't explain that, and its silence would speak volumes about the nonsensical ratings system it and other networks insisted was the best option.

*Research compiled by Jessica Bearor, Christine Brookhart, Carey Evans, Alice Lynn O'Steen, and Kristina Sewell.*

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